

Gulkana Village Council
P.O. Box
Gakona, AK 99586

Unified Watershed Assessment

A. Existing Assessment Efforts

The Gulkana Village Council is currently working with several projects that affect the Gulkana River Watershed. Much of the Gulkana River is part of the Gulkana Wild River designation. All of the Gulkana River watershed is part of our customary and traditional use territory. We are participating in the Gulkana River limits of acceptable change process with the BLM and we are also addressing concerns near Gulkana Village from intensive camping in this area with no sanitary facilities that has contaminated our Village drinking water supply. Litter and garbage are also a problem.

Economic development is a necessity for our Village and we need to do such development in an environmentally sound manner.

B. Geographic Scope and Scale

The Gulkana River must be evaluated in its entirety. There are three main branches of the Gulkana, the West Fork, the Middle Fork and the North Fork. The 8-digit hydrologic units defined by USGS don't make a lot of sense to our Tribal elders and we assess watersheds as a comprehensive system.

C. Unified Watershed Assessment Categories

Most of the Gulkana Watershed is best defined as category III pristine or category IV needing more data. However, there are parts of the watershed that do need remedial work (category I) These areas are the over fished areas on the lower Gulkana, the areas around the Richardson Highway Bridge at 128 mile and some of our allotments and trails where soil and bank erosion conservation measures are needed. In addition, more data is needed on the effects of the increased use of jet boats on the lower river and the increasing impact of recreational use in the wild river corridor. There are category II sections of the river where there is currently no water quality problems, but preventive measures need to be taken to implement the pipeline contingency plan to reduce the risk of pollution from an accidental oil spill from the Trans Alaska Pipeline where it crosses the Gulkana River and its tributaries.

D. Assessment Criteria

Our assessment criteria will rely heavily on the traditional knowledge of our Tribal elders. In addition, we will use information generated during the TAPS contingency plan process, the BLM Wild river LAC process, the Alaska BOF annual reports and other scientific and Tribal data that is available from many agencies and sources.

More information is needed before aggregation decisions can be made to classify the entire watershed into a particular category. There are many separate areas within the watershed that are unique and need further study.

E. Other Assessment Considerations

The Gulkana River is a source of drinking water for some of our elders and our Village water system.

The Gulkana watershed has a number of current owners. The entire watershed is our traditional territory. Currently there are portions of the watershed administered by USDI BLM, and the State of Alaska. Much of the lower portion of the watershed has been conveyed to our regional Native Corporation, Ahtna Inc. There are numerous Native allotments on the watershed; there is private property and the state of Alaska has selected much of the watershed as part of its statehood entitlement but the land is currently still under BLM management.

Some additional considerations related to watershed assessments are identified below.

Currently, there is a watershed project under way for the entire Copper River Watershed. The Gulkana is a tributary to the Copper River. Some of our members have participated in this effort.

The Gulkana Village Council plans to take the lead on the Gulkana watershed assessment efforts because the watershed is traditional Tribal territory and the land conveyance status is in a constant state of change. We live on the watershed and are in the best position to advocate for the stewardship of the watershed.

F. Data and Tools

Our assessment tools, methods and criteria will rely heavily on the traditional knowledge of our Tribal elders. In addition, we will use information generated during the TAPS contingency plan process, the BLM Wild river LAC process, the Alaska BOF annual reports and other scientific and Tribal data that is available from many agencies and sources.

We will tailor our assessment efforts to methods that are appropriate for each area using our elders for consultants to assist with the design of the assessments.

G. Roles and Responsibilities

The Gulkana village Council will have a lead role in the assessment process. There are many stakeholders on the watershed and maintaining a positive constructive conversation with everyone involved is a challenge for us.

We represent the traditional interests of the aboriginal inhabitants of the watershed and also work with our regional Native corporation on many land and water use issues. Other significantly involved stake holders are the State of Alaska, private land owners, USDI BLM, and Alyeska Pipeline Service Company. All of these agencies and others have a role to play in being involved. The Gulkana Village Council will take the lead in bringing this group together. We plan to take advantage whenever possible of existing coordination mechanisms with federal, international, and state agencies.

There are no local governments within the watershed. Gulkana Village Council is the Federally recognized Tribal Government for the Gulkana watershed.

III. DEFINING WATERSHED RESTORATION PRIORITIES

The first priority watershed restoration area is protection and restoration of Tribal trust resources. The tribal lands of the Gulkana River watershed have been changed in status

over the years. The Alaska constitution protects Indian fish and hunting camps (article 12 section 12) and the Federal Government has a trust responsibility to protect the interests of Indian Tribes. After Statehood, the people of Gulkana have been removed from our traditional camps on the Upper Gulkana. The justification for this was resource conservation. Currently, a large sport fishery has replaced our traditional fisheries on the river. We are concerned that the harvest from this activity exceeds the traditional harvest. Many people currently use jet boats for fishing. We are concerned that this may damage the spawning beds and the river banks. More data is needed to assess this area. In addition, a large camp is set up across the river from our Village every summer. There are no sanitary facilities. This is part of the Native town site of Gulkana. The state of Alaska has claimed this for a gravel pit but does not use it for a pit. It does allow the public to camp in it without regulation. The large concentration of people without sanitary facilities is up stream from the intake for our Village water supply. Resolving these issues is the number one priority.

Priority 2 is to develop a long range watershed management plan

Priority 3 is to gather more data to address the impacts of these activities and restore the river and put in preventive measures on the lower parts of the river.

Priority 4 is to do soil and bank stabilization and conservation programs on the watershed particularly on Native Allotments and trails.

Priority 5 is to participate and assist with the implementation of the Trans Alaska Pipeline Contingency plan as it relates to spill prevention and response within the Gulkana watershed.

IV. WATERSHED RESTORATION ACTION STRATEGIES

The clean water action plan will be developed as part of the long range watershed management plan. Gulkana will work with public agencies and private-sector organizations and citizens to develop, based on the initial schedule for the first two years, Watershed Restoration Action Strategies, for the parts of the Gulkana Watershed most in need of restoration.

We will identify measurable goals in the process. Currently some goals defined are to restore trust resources, restore to a pristine state areas impacted by concentrations of recreational users, provide good input to the Gulkana LAC process, conduct soil and bank stabilization projects and work with Alyeska on implementation of the pipeline contingency plan.

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March 5, 1999

Greg Gwaltney
UWA Working
4503 F U.S. EPA
401 M ST. S.W.
Washington, DC 20460

Dear Mr. Gwaltney:

The Gulkana Village Council is submitting its Tribal Unified Watershed Assessment for the Gulkana River. We have had very little resources to prepare this document and request additional assistance for furthering this work.

If you have any questions, please contact me at the above number.

Sincerely:

GULKANA VILLAGE COUNCIL

Eileen Ewan/Ric

Eileen Ewan, President